

# WHERE IS YOUR GOD?

By ROBERT O'CONNELL

**A** GAIN AND AGAIN, in a variety of forms, the psalmist puts this mocking question into the mouths of his adversaries: 'Where is your god?'. The gentiles could point to their idols; they at least were visible, tangible, like all the most solid and trusty features of human existence; trees and stones and the walls of houses – these were things a man knew were 'there'. But Israel's God? Where was he?

From one point of view, the israelite found his God had stripped him of all reply to this mocking query: he had forbade that his people even make an image of him. So high was his holiness beyond all human imaginings or embodiments, any attempt to portray his reality, represent it for the worshipper in the substantial materials of wood or stone or gold, was out of the question. It would place him on the same footing as those 'strange gods' the neighbouring nations revered and, through the rites enacted before their images, frequently sought to placate, petition, manipulate for their purposes. Beyond all imagining, Yahweh remained beyond all human manipulation also: the holy One, sovereignly free in his actions towards man, and even towards the people he had freely chosen as his own.

And yet, paradoxically, that same lofty divinity *had* chosen that people as his own; had entered graciously into a covenant with them; had promised repeatedly, to Abraham and to generations of his descendants, that he would always be with them. 'With': as the warrior-God whose sorties into their history their eye of faith could discern; the God of the ark they carried with them into battle, calling upon him to scatter his foes, the foes of his people, before him. Later in their national life, he would consent to establish another kind of presence among them: despite there being no image of him there, despite the elaborate precautions of outer, inner, and inmost sanctuaries which translated the inaccessible remoteness proper to One whose only dwelling must be holier than the Holy of Holies, the numinous cloud of his visitation, the *Shekinah*, did enshroud the newly dedicated temple for all eyes to see. Intervening in their history, or establishing another sort of 'with-ness' in their central shrine, Yahweh – the God whose name the pious israelite would

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not even pronounce – had condescended to become present to, indeed, make his dwelling among, his chosen ones.

This gave the mocker's question another twist: he could stand off, surveying the series of disastrous reverses, defeats, and inner divisions that punctuated Israel's national career, and twit the israelite on his continuing faithful trust in God. The words would be spoken much later, in a circumstance charged with irony: 'He puts his trust in God; now let God rescue him if he wants him'.<sup>1</sup> 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me'<sup>2</sup> – that anguished cry admits that there are moments when the God who promised to remain with man seems to have retired into his impenetrable remoteness; the world seems to go on, men behave, and justice, decency, love get trampled as though God did not exist. The living God, this Being of unpredictable interventions, of sudden unaccountable forays into human events, seems to be 'dead'. Dead, or at least so far from man and deaf to his earthly concerns that he is 'dead for us'.

Far and yet near; infinitely transcendent and yet entering the arena of human history, indeed, immanent in the web not only of events but of natural processes; the paradox of a God who, in a paraphrase of Augustine's celebrated expression, is both higher than the highest and yet the deepest heart of the heart of everything, has exercised the religious intelligence of every age and every persuasion. Foolishness for the unbeliever, it is for the believer a stumbling-block which his faith must each new day surmount.

For it is not merely a problem for the theological experts, one which the believer can unconcernedly leave for academic discussion. The theologians, in this matter, are discussing one of the central tensions of the christian life as the believer must live it. And it is doubtful that one can live a christian life without some confidence that it makes intellectual sense; the life of faith perennially requires that the liver of that life possess, however vaguely or indirectly, some notion of the theoretical terms which support his presumption that the life he leads is not some crazy flight in the face of basic common sense. Not everyone can be a theologian; but there are times when the believer is more than ordinarily called upon to profit from the theologian's insight. His work is being done on behalf of the faith of the entire christian body.

This need for the theological segment of the christian community to illumine the everyday faith of the believer is only the more urgent

<sup>1</sup> Mt 27, 43.

<sup>2</sup> Ps 22, 1; Mt 27, 46.

in our day; more urgent, precisely in the measure that it has become more widely possible. Sticking to the question at hand, the theologians who proclaim, in tones ranging from the enthusiastically lyric to the woefully lugubrious, that 'God is dead' have found that suddenly the broadest range of communications media – from learned journals to TV and, yes! improbably, *Playboy* magazine – are at their disposal. The expression may be over-used, but there it is literally true: never before in human history has it happened that a current of theological speculation could make so quick an entrance into the bloodstream of attitude and belief. Theological ideas are exerting an almost instantaneous impact on the religious lives of ordinary people. But at the same time 'ordinary' people are not so ordinary as they were in ages past: education has put theological reflection in closer reach of them than formerly.

Which means that before advancing on the properly spiritual side of the Death of God issue – the side immediately relevant to the christian life as it must be lived – some information must be given, however rudimentarily, on the theoretical grounds for a movement which has put the mocker's question into the mouths and on the pens of thinkers who claim to believe: 'Where is your God?', they ask us, and the various senses of that question are worth trying to grasp.

### *God and human suffering*

It should be no surprise that the age-old question of suffering is again brought forward by the advocates of this movement: how can one seriously believe that God can intervene in human history, is living and personal and truly cares for the humanity he has fashioned, when history confronts us with the saddening spectacle of human suffering. True, the ancient jewish prophets repeatedly traced the sufferings of Israel to God: he was judging them, punishing them for and purifying them of their infidelity to him. But Doctor Rieux in Camus' novel, *The Plague*, echoes for the modern ear what Dostoevski's Ivan Karamazov so eloquently argued in the hearing of another generation: this answer of the prophets seems a trifle too easy; for one thing, it fails to touch the suffering of the innocent. In plague as in war, the children are the first to be victimized, weak as they are, helpless to retaliate, blankly unable to comprehend what has struck them down, or why. It is no longer possible for contemporary man to believe Augustine when, in the first book of his *Confessions*, he subtly traces back the sinfulness of infants to their having been 'conceived in iniquity', as justly objects of the divine wrath as adults

can be. Despite Freud's lurid portrayal of their precocity, it simply does not go down: the suffering of a child still strikes the twentieth century mind as a scandal in the literal sense, a stumbling-stone for the intelligence which would take seriously God's existence and capacity to intervene in our world.

But even were the question to be limited to adults, a Jewish theologian has more recently argued,<sup>1</sup> can one honestly assent to the proposition that Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and all the shrieking horrors of the gas-chambers, were God's chastising judgment upon the Jewish people? No, he concludes; for him, God's death certificate was issued once and for all during the second world war.

But the argument from suffering supposes that God could act, intervene, change the course of human events, and at the limit, influence the process of physical nature itself. What is being stressed is that side of the biblical presentation of God whereby we are asked to believe he is with his people, not only in the cultic, static way represented by the temple, but in the active, dynamic mode required to understand his actions on behalf of the Israelite armies embarked on their holy wars. There is another side to that picture, however: it is stressed with different effect by other authors identified with the Death of God movement. Depending on their ultimate intention, they either remind us of, or inveigh against, the image of God as 'far', 'out (or up) there'. A Robinson would have us become *Honest to God*, banish all such images, replacing them with the contrary image (as Robinson seems only vaguely aware) of God as in the 'depths', at the very 'heart' of things and persons and events. The God we formerly thought of as transcendent we must now think of as thoroughly (or does Robinson mean exclusively?) immanent.

#### *God's immanence and the human project*

Robinson would limn the Christian God in a way he feels more relevant to human desires and hopes; would take him down from the frosty heights of his remoteness, immerse him in the reality of human life and history, filling and enriching that human reality in the way required for us to take the human project – history, the building of a better earth, the construction of a world community in understanding and love – with the dedicated seriousness so admirable in contemporary man. The same accent is heard from Harvey Cox:<sup>2</sup> contemporary man is incurably secular, committed to the

<sup>1</sup> Rubenstein, Richard L., *After Auschwitz* (New York, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> *The Secular City* (New York, 1965).

profane, pragmatic task of building the human city here and now; the values he reveres are immanent values, and so the old escapist spirituality must go. It may not be true, for Cox, that God is *really* dead, but from the major portion of what he writes it seems that man is called upon to live as though God's remains were in stately repose in the adjoining room; the surviving family meanwhile being urged to make the wake a decently merry occasion. Too long has the world been treated as a drab factory to furbish souls for their flight to another world they yearn, or should be made to yearn, for: paint the factory in brighter colours, and the work of this world will leap ahead accordingly. Each with his personal accent, Hamilton, Van Buren and Altizer<sup>1</sup> set up the alternatives the same way: forced to choose between a this-worldly rather than an other-worldly version of the gospel, the christian of today must choose this world, and then 'get with it'. Spirituality should underline, not man's weaknesses, his needs and longings and limits, but his strength, power, creativity: his potential for bettering the human world God has put him on. Instead of preaching the God who 'fills in the gaps' where man finds himself wanting, who solves the problems which still (though presumably only temporarily) elude his mastery, who takes up the torch at the limit which man's wisdom and endurance bring him to, we are counselled to preach a God who can be found at the 'centre' of the human concern. But then, the message becomes a trifle fuzzy: one wonders sometimes if the God of the centre is not equal to the human resources of which he is the centre; if he has not become identical with the creation to which Cox, Van Buren, Altizer and Hamilton have made him immanent. Is the transcendent God, for Cox, quite 'dead'? He is, at least, in very bad condition: so bad, the diagnosis of the latter three authors leaves him not a glimmer of hope.

#### *God's transcendence and 'idolatry'*

But this, another and quite different voice among the Death of God theologians warns us, is more a diagnosis of man's sickness, not God's. Gabriel Vahanian<sup>2</sup> harks back to that side of the biblical tradition which stresses exactly God's transcendent remoteness. Contemporary man's attitude, he notes, including the attitude of the

<sup>1</sup> See Van Buren, Paul, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York, 1963); Altizer, Thomas and Hamilton, William, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (1966) (pp 193-202 contains a good initial bibliography of this 'movement'). See also, in many ways the inspiration of this style of thought, Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (published originally as *Prisoner for God*) (New York, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> *The Death of God* (New York, 1957); also *Wait Without Idols* (New York, 1964).

above-mentioned authors, reflects the slow cultural development whereby the scientific exploration and technological mastery of this world combined to persuade man that he can deal with all his problems without God. True, the values that mean something to man today are almost exclusively immanent, this-worldly values: but that simply means that he has become deaf to the call of the transcendent biblical God, who never should have been conceived as solver of this world's problems in the first place. Any attempt on man's part to form some intellectual, or cultural conception of that God, depict him as the bearer of comfort, the piece (however central) that allows our intellectual view of the world to make sense, arises from man's inveterate tendency to fabricate idols, to set up strange gods in the place of God. He so surpasses the reach of mind and image as to shatter all our efforts to grasp him, much less fit him into any system of thought or culture. Man's present deafness to the voice of this utterly transcendent God is a phase; a purifying phase of history, resulting among other things from the churches' unfaithful compliance in abetting modern man's endeavours to make God useful, somehow, in the human frame of things. We are being coached to 'wait without idols' for the moment when the human heart is once more ready to entertain the notion of the biblical God in all his aniconic purity.

Vahanian's plea, quite obviously, moves in a direction quite the opposite of the Death of God theologians mentioned previously. His portrait of God, moreover, is just as unilateral as theirs; against their aggressive insistence on God's immanence, he pits an equally unrelieved stress, prophetic in its fervour (and, at times, in the sybil-line cast of its language), on God's transcendence.

*The incarnation and God's presence in history*

Prophetic in fervour, his message is distinctly unprophetic in import: none more than the prophets of the Old Testament were convinced that, however transcendent, God could, and did, intervene in human history, and that his interventions could be discerned. Mesmerized by the aniconic strand of the Old Testament, Vahanian does not seem able to make much of the New Testament's central affirmation, that the Word of God came to us in that 'image' of the Father, Jesus Christ: christology holds a surprisingly reduced position in his thinking. This weakened sense of incarnation leads him to undervalue all the signs, institutions, cultic and cultural forms whereby successive generations of christians must embody

their faith-understanding of God's continuing word for his people, as well as their ever-renewed response to that word. Without constant renewal, it is true, those forms and institutions can congeal, turn into idols which stand between, rather than mediating between, God and his people.

*The 'signs' of transcendence*

The renewal of forms and institutions – not only liturgical, but structural forms like parish and roman curias – is something all wings of the Death of God theology have close to heart; the immanentist wing may have lost the sense of mediation – these are but signs and forms in-and-through which the 'divine commerce' is transmitted: the encounter with other people and with Christ himself draws the christian's mind and heart into the 'other' sphere of transcendence about which Vahanian writes so fervently. Such mediating realities must never be reduced to mere instruments – people, and the progress of the human task of building the earth, must be taken seriously, more seriously than a Vahanian, and with him a whole procession of catholic spiritual writers from the past, have bid us take them. And yet, they are not ultimates, God alone is that: how is the theologian to find concepts and words to express the paradox whereby created things become more fully themselves precisely in exercising their mediating function more powerfully? It is certain he will never succeed unless the life of the christian community sustains him in the task of observing, then articulating, and by his articulation constantly reforming and renewing, the ways in which the people of God read, and respond to the 'signs' proper to their time. The life of christians must make his a genuinely living word for them.

To 'read the signs of the times': that phrase of our Lord runs like a *leitmotiv* through the recent Council's constitution on *The Church in the Modern World*. The underlying suppositions become explicit as the document unfolds: that God's transcendence does not forbid his addressing his church through the signs of events, movements, the hopes and aspirations of mankind. And yet, the very message the church reads in today's signs is that the hopes and aspirations of mankind, the progress of the human task, must be taken seriously by the christian. Similarly, liturgical forms however much renewed must always point beyond themselves to the God with whom the worshipping community enters into mysterious communion; and yet, those forms must constantly be revitalized and psychologically

adapted: on the human plane, they must be meaningful enough to effect what they signify, the unity of the worshipping community. Only then are they suitable for their mediating work: a work whereby God's Spirit works in and through them to build up the Body in love. Let them freeze, rigidify, and out of a fraudulent sense of respect for tradition remain too long unrenewed, and they do become idols.

*Community: christian and human*

Renewed in docile response to the Spirit's prompting, however, and employed by the people of God in the same Spirit, they can become the schooling medium for all that the Death of God theologians rightly exact of us. A school where the worshippers experience the mystery of their union with each other in Christ; experience again the encounter with Christ as 'sacrament' of their encounter with the transcendent God; realize, however dimly, the need for careful discernment of the signs whereby God still, from age to age, communicates with his people – signs which come to us from his realm of ineffable mystery, and so include an ineradicable element of bafflement, like the sign of suffering, the sign of the cross. Formed in that school, the people can truly 'go forth' when dismissed from it, not merely in the easy camaraderie of the scout-troop or alumni reunion, but themselves become signs of the peace, love and joy imparted by the risen Christ, a leaven, salt and light to their fellows labouring at humanity's unfolding task in history.

Perhaps what is needed is less a theoretical answer to the theoretical difficulties, but just such living signs of 'where' the christian God is encountered, and how: as the 'beyond within', the polyphonic texture of human life; a polyphony in which, as Bonhoeffer put it (in a phrase the Death of God theologians too often ignore) God's reality contributes a kind of *cantus firmus*, a 'ground bass . . . firm and clear' to which 'the other melodies of human life provide the counterpoint.' Without that ground bass, 'there can be no full and perfect sound' and human life risks losing its wholeness; but with it, 'the counterpoint has a firm support and can never get out of tune or fade out, yet is always a perfect whole in its own right'.<sup>1</sup> The christian must be ready to show in his style of life that he takes human realities not less, but immeasurably more, seriously because he knows God *is*, is a living God, both immanent and infinitely transcendent.

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp 175–6.